

hold me tight and never let go by FateChica

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Summary:

Five days ago, El closed the Gate and saved the world and there's only one thing she wants: to see Mike again.

Good thing Mike wants to see her just as badly.

hold me tight and never let go

Author's Note:

Whee, another part of this series! This preempted my new fic because my brain WOULDN'T LET THIS GO. So, yay?

"I want to see him."

"Kid, I don't know. You're still-"

"No, I'm feeling better. And you said I could." A pause, silence filled with a snuffle, lips turn down in a pout. "You *promised*."

A sigh, resignation and capitulation. "Alright, fine. I'll see what I can do, ok? Give me a couple days."

The days immediately following after El closes the Gate are *exhausting*. El spends most of them in bed, asleep. She's not sick, exactly, but drained, run down. Her limbs feel too heavy, like someone added weights to them when she wasn't looking, and even moving to go to the bathroom exhausts her to the point of needing to take a two hour nap afterwards.

But, even with all of that, even as it takes what feels like forever to get stronger, to get *better*, back to normal, there's only one thing she wants: to see Mike again.

It's only been a few days since she saw him last – waking up in Will's bedroom to see Mike sleeping next to her, watching him wake up, having him wrap his arms around her and letting her rest her head on his shoulder. But she went so long – *353 days* – without seeing him that the hours she was with him, though she relished every moment, were not nearly enough to make up for the time without him.

And Hop *promised* that she could see Mike, promised that she wouldn't have to hide alone anymore.

So, when she tells Hop she wants to see Mike again and Hop tries to deny her, El does the only thing she can think of.

She guilt trips him.

She's seen it on her soaps. A woman turns to a man and pouts and looks sad and the man gives in to whatever the woman is asking. In her soaps, though, those women were usually not *really* sad. Which meant it's different when El does it. Because she *is* sad. Or, not *sad*, really. Not like she had been. But she *misses* Mike, misses him so much it hurts. And so the pout she gives Hop, plus the little snuffle, well...those aren't fake.

Hop caves, because of course he does – El knows when his shoulders slump and he sighs, looking away for a brief moment before he looks back at her with a soft expression on his face.

And, suddenly, despite the exhaustion that still weighs on her, despite the way her eyelids still feel way too heavy (it feels like someone is tugging them down like the way she pulls down the window shades), a happy little thrill runs through El and she smiles.

She's going to see Mike again. And she *can't* wait.

It takes a bit of arranging and communicating – Hop to Joyce to Will to Mike – but Friday after El closes the Gate finds Mike sitting on the couch in Will's living room, backpack by his knee, which is currently bouncing up and down with nervous energy.

Will's sitting next to him, wrapped in a sweatshirt and thick flannel PJ pants, looking better than he's looked in a while. He's been out of school all week, recovering from what happened, and Mike's been coming over after school almost every day, checking up on Will and bringing him notes and homework from school so he doesn't get too

far behind.

It's on one of this trips where Will passed on the news that El wants to see him *and* that Hopper's going to let him visit her. So, the cover story is that Mike is spending the night at Will's (and, he will, later that evening, he's pretty sure. It's not like he's going to be spending the night...wherever El's been staying this whole time – Nancy said it was a cabin, but Mike has no point of reference for what that might mean, so his brain's keeping those details vague whenever he thinks about it).

But, for a while at least, he's going to get to spend time with El. And the thought makes him so excited, he can barely contain himself. He loads up his backpack with stuff he wants to show El, things he wants to do with her – the first Star Wars movie for them to watch together, a couple of toys of his that he wants her to have, a few comic books he wants to show her (maybe even let her borrow if she's interested, which he's secretly hoping for), a few books of Nancy's that she let him borrow that she thinks El might like, a couple of small games like Pick-Up Sticks and a deck of cards, some of his favorite candy leftover from Halloween.

It occurs to Mike, the thought hitting him like a punch to the heart as he sits in Will's living room, that there's a lot of things he doesn't know. Like if wherever she is has a VCR, much less a TV, or how well she knows how to read. But, most of all, what he's realizing with sickening dread is that, while he knows El and cares about her more than he has the words to say, he doesn't really *know* her.

What does she like? What does she hate? Does she have a favorite kind of book or movie or TV show? What does she like to do? And, maybe most importantly, what if the answers to any of those questions don't come anywhere close to matching *his* answers for those questions? Will that mean that any possible relationship between them is doomed before it can start?

(In a distant, calmer corner of his heart, a voice whispers *no, of course not*, but Mike's not really in much of a *calm* mood at the moment, so the voice goes unheeded beneath all the anxiety that bubbles in his veins.)

"Mike, calm down. You're making the whole couch shake," Will says and Mike gives a start. He's been so preoccupied with El and all the thoughts swirling in his head that he just about forgot that Will was even here.

"Sorry," Mike says, looking over at Will with a sheepish smile on his face. "Just...I dunno, nervous, I guess."

Will smiles and breathes out a small laugh. "It's ok, I get it. Probably excited too, yeah?"

Mike gulps, nodding. "Yeah, that too. I still can't believe she's back. And, well, I just hope she likes the stuff I'm bringing over."

"I'm sure she'll love it, Mike. She likes you, right? She'll probably just be happy to see you again."

"It's just..." Mike trails off, licking his lips. "What if she hates all the stuff I bring over? Like, what if we have nothing in common?"

Save for the sounds of Mrs. Byers moving around in the kitchen behind Will, gathering things together for Hopper to take with him – a couple of casseroles, a bag of Nancy's old clothes that she brought over to give to El – a long silence stretches between the two boys as they look at each other, Mike agonizing and Will uncertain. But, then Will sighs, shaking his head. "I don't know, Mike. But I don't think you should worry so much. Just show her the stuff you like and if she likes it, she likes it. If not, then you two can figure out stuff you both like. I'm sure there has to be *something*."

Yeah, it's a big universe, Mike thinks. Surely there exists *something* that they have in common.

It's a worst case scenario, but the thought still gives Mike hope and he feels the knot of anxiety loosen from around his ribcage. "Thanks, Will," Mike says, smiling slightly.

The smile Will gives Mike in return is bright and toothy and just so relieving to see. Mike's so, so glad Will's still here to smile like that. "No problem. I'm just glad you and El get to see each other." Will's smile turns mischievous. "There's only so much mooning over how

much you miss her the rest of us can take.”

Mike reaches out and shoves Will, hand hard against his shoulder. “Shut up,” Mike says as Will bursts out laughing.

Will’s smile hasn’t budged. “Are you gonna kiss her, Wheeler?”

“None of your business, Byers,” Mike says, feeling his cheeks flush. One, because now he can’t stop thinking about the two kisses that he and El have shared – the first one a year ago in cafeteria at school, but the second one just a few days ago after he woke up to see El lying next to him, tired but still so, so pretty, where *she* kissed *him* this time, instead of the other way around. But, also, he can’t stop thinking, *hoping*, that he might get to kiss her again, feel the softness of her lips against his and hear the soft gasp of her breath.

God, he can’t believe he can *hope* for this again and, despite the blush that threatens to burn permanently into his skin, Mike doesn’t think he’s ever been happier.

El’s back. And he gets to see her.

The doorbell rings and Mike’s heart leaps into his throat. Mrs. Byers comes bustling in from the kitchen and beelines it towards the front door, opening it to reveal Chief Hopper. Mike watches as Mrs. Byers waves Hopper inside, the older man eyeing the room like he’s expecting something to jump out of the shadows. Mike can’t help the way he gulps when Hopper’s gaze lands on him. The look in Hopper’s eyes is guarded, almost flat, and Mike can’t read anything in it.

“You ready to go, kid?” Hopper asks as he looks at Mike.

Mike nods, wishing he didn’t feel so small (but really he knows he can’t help it – Hopper’s a *giant* compared to Mike). “Yeah, m’ready.”

“Well, then, get a move on it. I’m on a tight schedule here.”

“Not so fast, Hop,” Joyce says, voice full of motherly scolding. “I have some things for you to take with you. A couple of casseroles – you can’t keep eating those *awful* TV dinners - and some more clothes for El.”

The look on Hopper's face turns from stony to...fondly annoyed?
"Joyce, really, you didn't have to-"

"I'm doing it for that poor girl you keep locked up in that cabin," Mrs. Byers said, cutting Hopper off. Mike fights off a smile as he stands and shoulds his backpack. "Really, Hop, I don't know how you've gotten away with feeding her frozen dinners for this long. Now, I may not be the best cook, but even what I can do is better than that."

"And we both appreciate it, Joyce," Hopper says. "Thank you."

Mrs. Byers' face softens in a small smile. "Well, you're welcome, Hop. Here, I'll help you carry everything out to the car."

"Bye, Mike," Will says, standing as Hopper and his mom carry food and clothes out to Hopper's police cruiser.

"Bye, Will. See you later tonight?" Mike says as he and Will exchange a quick hug.

"Yeah. Tell El I say hi. And have fun."

"Ok, thanks," Mike says before he follows Hopper and Mrs. Byers outside.

A few minutes later and Mike is sitting in the front seat, seatbelt buckled, arms wrapped around his backpack that's sitting in his lap. An awkward silence fills the car's interior as Hopper drives, Mike keeping one eye on the route they're taking so he can find his way back to El on his own.

But, eventually, the silence is too much and Mike risks a glance over at Hopper. Hopper's driving with one hand on the wheel, the other with his elbow leaning against the door so he can prop up his head. The look on Hopper's face is carefully neutral and Mike feels like his stomach is just going to twist itself into knots if he doesn't do something to break the tension

So, Mike takes in a deep breath and speaks. "Um, thank you. For letting me come over and visit, for letting me see her."

Hopper sighs and glances over at Mike with what looks like the barest hint of a smile. “No problem, kid. She’s been asking to see you and I figure she deserves a break. It’s been a tough week for her, recovering after what happened and all that.”

“O-oh, uh, yeah, I bet,” Mike stutters. “Um, how is El doing?”

“Pretty tired, been sleeping a lot,” Hopper says. “Closing the Gate took a lot out of her. She’s getting better, though.”

“Good, that’s good,” is all Mike can think of to say and silence takes over the car once more.

After a bit, Hopper lets out another sigh, louder this time. “Right, look, here’s the deal. I gotta work late tonight, so it’ll just be the two of you until I get home around 10. Which means I need you to watch out for her, ok? She’s getting better, but she still has a ways to go until she’s back to 100%. Make sure she eats something and don’t go doing anything crazy. No wild adventures, no getting her worked up, nothing, you understand me?”

Struck silent for a moment – he and El are going to be *alone* for almost 6 hours where he can just *be* with her without being scared someone’s watching and it’s all he’s ever really wanted – Mike nods, but then realizes that Hopper’s not looking at him. “Yessir, I understand,” Mike says.

Hopper glances over at Mike and breathes out what sounds like a short laugh. “You’re alright, kid. Just as long as you remember to make sure she’s happy and taken care of, we’ll be fine, you and me.”

Mike doesn’t have anything to say – he still feels like he’s on thin ice after exploding at Hopper last weekend and doesn’t want to risk doing *anything* that might take away this chance to see El again. So he just makes a small hum in agreement and focuses on watching where they’re going, memorizing the path that stretches between him and El, every minute that passes one that brings him closer to her. And so, he watches and waits.

By Friday, El's feeling better than she has in days – but how much of that is because she's actually feeling better or because she knows she's seeing Mike later that day, she doesn't know.

She's so excited that it feels like her skin is too small to contain her, like she's just going to burst apart and float away. And so, trapped in the cabin with too much emotion that has very few outlets, El funnels her energy into making sure everything is *perfect* – cleaning and dusting and arranging. She's suddenly very aware of how *different* Mike's house is from the cabin, how much nicer his house is, with more things in it and just *bigger*. El can't help but be nervous as she agonizes over every small detail.

And another thing she agonizes over? What to wear. In all the shows she watches, the women in them always want to look good for the men they're trying to impress, wearing beautiful outfits in all sorts of colors and styles, each of them prettier than the last. El, with her limited wardrobe, doesn't have that luxury. And while she knows that Mike won't care (he didn't last year, after she came back the first time, wig long gone, dirt freshly scrubbed from her face but not from her clothes. *Still pretty?* – *Yeah, pretty, **really** pretty*), El thinks she does. She wants to look pretty for him, she realizes with a blush that sears into her skin, and she doesn't have many ways of accomplishing that.

Hopper came home a few nights ago with a bag of clothes from Joyce, things maybe more appropriate for a 13 year old girl than whatever Hop had been able to scrape together over the past year, so she has more options now than she did, but it's still not a lot. El eventually settles a pair of jeans that are bit too loose on her (a pair that Joyce brought over that fit better than anything Hop gave her) and a pretty, pale blue thermal that keeps her warm and has little white flowers patterned on the fabric. She fusses with her hair in the bathroom mirror, trying to tuck her curls behind her ear in a way that brings some order to them, but everything she tries just makes it worse and El feels like giving in to despair. Why does this have to be so hard?

As the clock ticks closer and closer to 4:00, when Hop said he'd have Mike over by, El feels increasingly nervous and antsy. She can't sit

still, she can't even concentrate long enough on the TV to watch it for long. And, with nothing else left to do, El takes to pacing, occasionally sitting in a huff, but only for a few minutes before her pacing resumes again.

And just when El thinks she really can't take it anymore, that she's just going to *die* from all the waiting and excitement and *longing*, the secret knock sounds at the door and El's heart leaps into her throat.

They're here!

El stands by the couch, hands clenching into fists around sweaty palms, as she unlocks the door with her powers – so much easier now than it was before closing the Gate, like she's gotten stronger – and *waits*.

The door opens and, at first, she sees only Hop as he walks in, arms laden with bags and dishware, the look on his face a little weary. But she hears Mike, hears him behind Hopper. "This is where-?"

And then Hop steps aside and she sees him and whatever question Mike was asking cuts off as he sees her, too. For a very, *very* long moment, they can only stare at each other, Mike standing in the open doorway, El by the couch, the distance between them mere feet that might as well be miles.

Mike's staring at her, eyes wide, mouth gaping, like he can't believe she's really there, like he can't believe he's actually seeing her. And, in this moment, El stops caring about what she looks like or how dingy the cabin feels compared to Mike's house. Because *he's here*, looking at her like she's all that matters, wearing dark jeans and a grey sweater, his hair a little messed up from the wind outside, all pretty and dark and pairing so well with the freckles that splash across his nose and cheeks that El wants to trace one at a time.

God, she wants to cry, she's so happy right now.

"Alright, you two." El jumps at the sound of Hop's voice and she's suddenly hyperaware that he's been here the entire time and El blushes as she looks at Hop. "I gotta head back to the station, so you two behave yourselves. Mike, when I get back, I'll take you over to

the Byers', ok?" Mike only nods and Hop gives the two of them a look before he's out the door, gently shoving Mike aside to close it behind him.

And then it's just Mike and El and the silence that surrounds them is deafening.

Until Mike speaks, just the barest whisper of her name – "*EL.*" – and El's moving before she's even fully aware of it, throwing her arms around him in a tight hug, her body trembling with too much emotion to be contained inside of her. She relishes in the feel of him against her, warm and real and *home*, and she never, *ever* wants this moment to end.

For a half second that feels like an eternity, Mike can't move. From the moment he walked in through the door of the smallest cabin known to man and saw El, he's been frozen in place, shock and disbelief and happiness and excitement swirling inside of him, rooting him to the floor.

Because she's *here* and *real* and *alive* and looking just so pretty he thinks he might die – flushed cheeks, eyes wide and sparkling, the pale blue of her top setting off the tone of her skin, and her hair, *god her hair*, an adorable cloud of soft curls that is nothing like he ever imagined she'd have. And she's staring at him like it's the happiest day of her life, like she can't believe it's real.

And then Hopper's gone, leaving just the two of them, and before Mike knows it, he has an armful of teenage girl. El's arms wrap tight around his torso, her head burrowing into his shoulder, and that eternity of a half second gives him enough time to luxuriate in the feel of her hugging him before he finally moves and hugs her back.

And it's the best hug of his entire life.

She's warm against him, warm and real and holding him so tight, he never wants her to stop. Her hair tickles against his neck, her breath

sweet against his throat, and the way she fits in his arms feels like he was made to hold her and *only* her.

They stand there for Mike's not sure how long, just holding each other tight, both of them trembling and Mike hears the occasional snuffle – both from El *and* from him – as they both try not to cry. He would feel more embarrassed at how emotional he feels right now, but it's only her here to see it and she's just as affected as he is. It's all so perfect that nothing can ruin this moment.

Eventually, though, the hug comes to an end and they pull away just enough so he can look down at her face. The way she's smiling up at him almost takes his breath away.

"Hi," she says, softly, her voice sweet and thrilling – especially because he almost thought he'd never hear it again. "You're here."

Mike can't help but laugh, but it sounds too breathy, too high pitched and he wonders just what in the hell is wrong with him – *happiness, love, home* his heart whispers, but he's too busy staring down at her to listen. "I'm here," he says. There's another long moment of silence, the two of them staring at each other, transfixed, and Mike suddenly, *desperately* wants to kiss her.

But, before he can, *she* does, reaching up to press her lips against his and Mike's heart feels like it's going to pound its way out of his chest, her lips soft and warm and sweet. He has enough presence of mind to kiss her back, to lean in and return the gentle pressure, hoping that he can convey everything he's feeling with the simple, but all-encompassing touch of his lips to hers.

And when they each pull away, both of them are blushing and Mike's glad that he's not the only one who feels too hot. He clears his throat, remembering that he's not just here to hug and kiss her, but to *spend time* with her – though he's sure there's going to be more hugging and, *hopefully*, more kissing and, once again, he can't believe that he's *here* with her, able to do all these things that once felt so out of reach.

It's with a little bit of reluctance that Mike pulls away, looking around the cabin as he does. "So, this is where you've been living?"

“Since Hop found me,” El says, looking a little bashful. Part of Mike wonders, *found her where*, but he ignores it as El keeps talking. “Did you want to sit?”

Mike shrugs, his backpack pulling on his shoulder as he does so. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you want, really.”

El smiles at him, shy but still beautiful, and Mike feels her hand take his, fingers wrapping around his palm, and tug him towards the couch. When they sit, Mike only lets go of her hand long enough to slip his backpack from his shoulders, all of his worries about her liking what he wants to share with her gone in the excitement of just being able to.

And, as it turns out, he has nothing to worry about after all.

The night flies by and El's never been happier. They watch the first Star Wars movie, which she loves, and read the comic books that Mike brought, which she likes well enough, but not as much as Mike seems to. They eat dinner – macaroni and cheese from one of the casserole dishes that Joyce made for her and Hopper – and, after, Mike shares the candy that he brought over. There's Snickers bars and peanut butter cups (which she really likes), Milk Duds (which...well, are ok), Smarties and Sour Patch Kids that make her lips pucker and tongue curl in her mouth, and Pop Rocks which explode in her mouth in a tingling, *fizzy* way that makes her laugh, which makes Mike laugh and it's El's favorite sound in the entire world.

In between it all, they talk, him fast and with all sorts of words she doesn't quite understand yet, her softly and hesitantly, but in a way that has him fascinated, waiting for each syllable that drops from her lips. She shares some of what happened to her during her year away, he talks about the past week at school, about some of the other things he didn't share during all those times he called for her. And, through it all, they're touching each other – holding hands, hugging, her leaning against him – and it's all El's ever wanted. It's all so happy

and carefree and *magical* that El never wants the night to end.

Eventually, though, it has to. Hop comes home and then Mike has to go. He leaves behind the books that Nancy gave him to give her – Little Women, The Phantom Tollbooth, A Wrinkle in Time – and a couple of his toys, a small teddy bear that he loved as a kid that he's long since out grown and Rory, which makes her smile as she hugs the small plastic toy close to her chest.

Hop gives them a moment to say goodbye and El hugs Mike tight, not wanting him to go, but understanding that he has to. "Will you be back soon?" she asks, knowing she sounds needy but not caring in the slightest.

"I was paying attention when Hopper drove me here," Mike says, holding her just as tight. "I'm pretty sure I can make my way back on my own. I'll be back soon, I promise."

El feels the sting of tears in her eyes and she tries to blink them away. "Ok," she says, softly.

Mike pulls back and looks down at her. El can't look away, can't get enough of the way his gaze dances over her face. After a quick check to make sure Hop isn't looking, he leans over to kiss her, light and quick but still exciting, still enough to make her heart beat loudly in her chest, still enough to take her breath away. "I'll see you later, El," he says, cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling.

El finds herself smiling and, even though she hates saying goodbye, she thinks she likes goodbye kisses enough that it makes the parting feel not so painful. "See you later, Mike."

They watch each other until Hop closes the door between them and El feels like part of her has walked out the door with Mike. But she knows, just *knows*, that she'll see him again soon, that now that Mike knows where she is, nothing will keep him from coming to see her again.

Because he *promised*. And that means *everything*.

Author's Note:

So, I don't really like this? I'm not sure what it is, but...it's not sitting the best with me. Still, I hope you enjoy!